



Region 2  
3201 Spurgin Road  
Missoula, MT 59804  
406-542-5500

April 8, 2019

Dear Interested Citizen:

Thank you for your thoughtful reviews and comments on a proposal by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to renew a Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement (lease) on its Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA) with Two-Creeks Ranch (TCR, private lessee). The proposed BCWMA-TCR lease would generally exchange grazing or hay on 887 acres of primarily non-native pasture on the BCWMA (northwest of Ovando in Powell County) for implementation of a restoration grazing system on 795 acres of TCR-owned or managed native grasslands that provide important elk winter forage. TCR would also treat weeds and maintain/repair pasture fences on BCWMA lands. Public hunting access would be allowed on private lands involved in the proposed lease. The lease would be effective from early May 2019 to October 1, 2024.

Enclosed is a decision document in which FWP explains its rationale for recommending that the Fish & Wildlife Commission approve the renewal of this habitat management agreement and grazing lease. Upon completion of the public involvement process, FWP accepts the draft environmental assessment (EA) as final. The decision document also includes all public comments received during the public comment period on the proposed habitat management agreement and grazing plan.

FWP will request approval for this proposal from the Fish & Wildlife Commission at its regularly scheduled meeting on April 25, 2019 in Helena. This meeting is open to the public, as are other regularly scheduled Commission meetings. (Earlier, this meeting had been scheduled to be held in Bozeman but has just been changed to Helena.)

Please feel free to contact me at 406-542-5500 with any questions you may have. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

Randy Arnold  
Regional Supervisor

RA:sr

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**DECISION NOTICE:**  
**Blackfoot Clearwater WMA and Two Creek Ranch**  
**Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Region 2  
3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula MT 59804  
Phone 406-542-5500  
April 8, 2019

**DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION**

The proposed 6-year Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement and Grazing Plan (Agreement) would allow the Two-Creek Ranch (TCR, the lessee) to graze (with some limited haying) approximately 887 acres of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' (FWP) Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA) land. In return, 795 acres of private land owned or leased by TCR would be part of a rest-rotation grazing system, and TCR would also perform some weed spraying and fence/gate maintenance on the BCWMA.

Compared to the previous 2013-2018 BCWMA-TCR Agreement, this proposed 2019-2024 Agreement involves changes to the portion of the BCWMA (acreage reduced to 887 acres) that would be subject to the Agreement. FWP land included in or covered by this current proposal is largely agricultural fields and hay meadows (Dreyer Meadows; pastures D1, D2, D6, D7, D9) historically planted to tame grasses. The Dreyer Meadows are part of the 1989 Dreyer Ranch addition to the BCWMA. Unlike most of the remainder of the WMA, the Dreyer Meadows were tilled and planted decades ago to tame nonnative hay meadows and small grains. Although these meadows are productive during summer, they do not provide high-quality deer and elk winter forage. Periodic grazing of these non-native grasses removes decadent material and encourages spring/fall regrowth used by deer and elk during those seasons. Prescribing regular growing-season rest to these pastures also improves grass vigor and allows rested pastures to provide winter elk and deer forage as well as habitat for ground-nesting birds. Under the proposed Agreement these pastures would receive growing season rest either two out of three years or every-other year for the duration of the Agreement.

The BCWMA's Boyd 4 and Ducks Unlimited (DU) Pond pastures are mainly tame grass. These pastures would receive grazing on a two- and three-year rotation, respectively.

The TCR pastures are 3 privately owned pastures consisting of native grasses covering non-forest landcover types. TCR entered into a grazing management plan administered by the Blackfoot Challenge in 2016 under the request of a neighboring private landowner (Shanley Creek Properties, LLC). Under the direction of that grazing management plan, the lessee must comply with the grazing design and pasture improvements. These privately-managed pastures (M1, M2) are open to public hunting access each fall season as longtime participants within FWP's Block Management Program (currently, Block Management Area #25, Shanley Creek). Under this proposed agreement the Two Creek Ranch would also rest the native pasture (S9) that they currently lease from the Shanley Creek Properties, LLC.

**Alternative/s to the Proposed Action**

The proposed grazing system, haying schedule, and associated improvements were developed by FWP biologists and wildlife habitat biologists. The only reasonable alternative at this point would be "No action." FWP believes that the cumulative wildlife benefit of implementing this grazing lease is significant; similarly, forgoing the proposed action would result in the likely degradation of important habitat and the public's opportunity to enjoy it.

## PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and to make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal (Blackfoot Clearwater WMA and Two Creek Ranch Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement) on February 15, 2019 and accepted public comment for 32 days until March 18, 2019.

Legal notice of the proposed project and its draft EA was published once each in the *Independent Record* (Helena, Feb 15), *Missoulian* (Feb 15) and *Seeley Swan Pathfinder* (Hamilton, Feb 21) newspapers. FWP issued a statewide news release (Feb 25) describing the proposal and opportunity for public comment.

FWP mailed 16 copies of the EA (and approximately 47 email notifications of the EA's availability) to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public review and comment on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov>, "Public Notices") from February 15 to March 18, 2019.

## SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

### Public Comment

FWP received 3 comments during the public review period, 2 from individuals and one from the Anaconda Sportsman Club (ASC, Anaconda; see Appendix for all comments received). Individuals making comment were from Hamilton and Missoula. All 3 commenters supported the proposed action, and no commenters were in opposition.

## DECISION

Based upon the EA and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, we have determined that the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, we conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

This EA represents a continuation of the Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement between the Two-Creek Ranch and FWP. The continued cooperation between the two parties represents a productive relationship between neighboring landowners and a commitment to resource conservation. This and past Agreements received substantial support from the local community.

No concerns were raised that would bring the environmental analysis into question, and in consideration of these facts and with this Decision Notice, I adopt the Draft EA as final.

Based on the analysis in the draft EA and the public comment received, I have selected the "Proposed Action." I will recommend to the Fish & Wildlife Commission that it approve FWP's proposed Blackfoot Clearwater WMA and Two Creek Ranch Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement, as described in the EA. This would occur at the Commission's next regularly scheduled meeting, which will be April 25, 2019 in Helena. (Earlier, this meeting was scheduled for Bozeman but has just been changed to Helena.)



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Randy Arnold  
Region 2 Supervisor  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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4/8/2019

Date

**APPENDIX.** Comments on the proposed Cooperative Habitat Management Agreement for FWP's Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA and the Two Creek Ranch received by FWP during the comment period of February 15 through March 18, 2019. (Comments received via E = email.)

Com- men- ter #	Via	Para- graph	Comment
1	E		<i>looks good, go for it</i>
2	E	1	<i>I'm headed to the hospital but wanted you and [name] to know I support both agreements [i.e., this BCWMA grazing proposal and the Threemile WMA forest proposal]. I'm not going to have time to go to your website and do all that stuff online.</i>
		2	<i>I'm voicing my support, as I always do, for ANY increase in public lands with funds from hunting and fishing licenses.</i>
		3	<i>I can't hunt anymore due to back and neck difficulties but I buy my licenses to help wildlife. I look forward to buying a grizzly bear license for that reason and I always buy a wolf license, although I have NEVER seen a wolf in the wild. Sure would love to before I die.</i>
		4	<i>Take care and in the spirit of Theodore Roosevelt, I say, the wildlife and its habitat cannot speak, so I must and we all must, and we do.</i>
		5	<i>Author and editor of 22 books on big-game hunting</i>
		6	<i>Hunter and mother of hunters</i>
		7	<i>Mother of Two black Labrador retrievers named Danni Boone and Betty Crockett</i>
3a	E		<i>This sounds like a good working relationship with Two Creek ranch. I like that they are responsible for fencing and the rotation sounds good. Most importantly there is hunter access to private ground and the elk are benefiting also.</i>
3b	E		<i>The Anaconda Sportsmen's Club is in favor of renewing the Agreement(lease) it worked well in the past. Two Creeks Ranch has proven to do their part in the past and will be obliged to do the same as dictated in the lease proposal. Thank You</i>